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From the Editor

Core Wars Worth Fighting

Yes, there are certain things that everybody should know. Usually they are the skills and principles that any society views as essential to its survival — first to hunt and fish, make clothes, and build a fire. Then to read and write and, the more sophisticated we become, to read the best books — the ones that explain the larger world and tell us about ourselves and the meaning of our lives with others.

E. D. Hirsch, Jr., in his review of Diane Ravitch's *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining American Education* (Basic Books) in the *New York Review of Books* (May 13) reminds us that American leaders in the nineteenth century realized that "Loyalty to the Republic had to be developed, as well as adherence to Enlightenment ideals of liberty and toleration. For without universal indoctrination by the schools in such civic virtues, the United States might dissolve, as had all prior large republics of history, through internal dissension." So the inspiring ideal of the common school was "not just to Americanize the immigrants, but also Americanize the Americans."

So the function of any school system — from the American public school, the diocesan parochial schools most of us grew up in, the elite universities, and the Jesuit educational system of high schools and colleges in which we work — is to pass along ideals. Historically the Jesuit "colleges" — which in America until the turn of the twentieth century were seven-years of courses sometimes capped with an MA in philosophy in an extra year — presented their ideals through the Greek and Roman Classics. They passed along the Catholic faith more through pious exercises, retreats, devotions, and strict surveillance of the dormitories than through academic theology. By the 1950s the "heart" had shifted to philosophy, seniors wore philosophy robes and took the equivalent of a second major in Thomism.

In the radical transformation of American higher education that followed World War II and accelerated in the cultural revolution of the 1960s, the rise of the social sciences and the expansion, even dominance, of professional training, with Holy Cross now the one remaining purely liberal arts college, the core curriculum has become the protective bastion of the ideals, with philosophy and theology (usually two courses each) at the embattled heart of the core. Small wonder that popular images of the core revision process are cinematic:

English and history professors pour boiling oil and shoot arrows from the castle walls as the Huns and Vandals from marketing and hotel management pour out of the forests with their battering rams; or, as in *Beau Geste*, a sole surviving Greek scholar props up the corpses on the fortress battlements as Berber tribesmen from management, communications, and criminal justice swarm over the desert dunes.

No matter how fanciful or paranoid the images, the costs of core wars are real. To replace a required literature course with something "practical," that might assure anxious students and helicopter parents that Saint Ignatius College will "get you a job," means that the computer science graduate may go to the job without having read Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Chekhov, or Hemingway. And a newly hired English professor, following the law of supply and demand, may lose his job and enroll in the evening school to become a computer scientist.

As the core shrinks, so does the imagination. And the diluted humanities soup has social consequences. Mark Slouka, in "Dehumanized: When math and science rule the school," in *Harper's* (September 2009), argues that the humanities are the last bulwark against totalitarianism; they are in the business of asking hard questions, upsetting people as we ask about "truth" and what is "good" — questions that unsettle repressive regimes. What is the utility of the classics? "Every aspect of life — every marriage, every job, every parent-teacher meeting — hinges in some way on the ability to understand and empathize with others, to challenge one's beliefs, to strive for reason and clarity."

This issue of *Conversations* invited 36 writers — six Jesuits, three former Jesuits, and 30 lay persons — to contribute some reason and clarity, with the hope that the dialogue will bring some peace and harmony to the battlefield. *Conversations* was founded to anticipate that time when Jesuit presence would shrink and — we hoped — lay persons would pick up the Ignatian ideals and make them their own. So in this collection of testimony, shared experience, last-word advice to the young, advice from the young, and in-depth analysis of the relevance of Ignatian ideals, mostly by lay faculty, we hope that the new cores will retain the heart of the old ones and both sustain the hopes and confront the fears of the world outside the castle walls.

RASsj